



VOICES IN THE HALL: LINDA RONSTADT

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today is Linda Ronstadt.

LINDA RONSTADT Emmy would come in with this list of tunes that just would be killer. You know she's, she stays up later than I do, and she hangs out later so she'd get all the great new songs. But really it was old-timey music, Dolly said. Oh that's old-timey music. And Emmy and I considered it parlor music.

We couldn't call it Bluegrass. We were thinking about calling it Pinkgrass.

I think music should hit you like where you experience a feeling you never knew you had before. You know you can hear a song and it can all of a sudden define an emotion for you that you didn't even know you were having until it digs it out of you.

I didn't think I was going to be famous or a star or anything like that. I just thought I was going to sing and that I would somehow get paid for that and I could live.

PETER COOPER Linda Ronstadt. One of popular music's classic voices. She's a 2019 recipient of a Kennedy Center Honor, for her lifetime contribution to American culture. As such, she joins Chuck Berry, James Brown, Bob Dylan, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Ray Charles, and Smokey Robinson, as well as iconic country musicians Roy Acuff, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, Willie Nelson, and Dolly Parton. That is serious company.

Linda is also a vocal model for, I would say, the majority of female contemporary country singers. When I spoke with her, she was at her home in San Francisco. I was in audio czar Alan Stoker's audio lair at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.

Linda Ronstadt thank you so much for being with us on Voices in the Hall. It's such a pleasure to talk with you. And you've had such a rich relationship with country music. So many so many times you've given voice to great country songs. When is the first time you remember being moved by music?

LINDA RONSTADT Well my family played music all the time at home. So. My father played the guitar and sang, my mother played ukulele and sang and played piano. Everybody was singing all the time, not professional level but just what families do when they're washing dishes or going on a camping trip or something. And so that was my. Hearing my. I remember begging my father to play his guitar and sing when I was about two.

But the first record that I heard was a record by Pastora Pavón, called La Niña de los Peines. It was a flamenco record from. She was a famous flamenco singer in the '20s in



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Spain. My aunt had brought it and it was really intense singing and I just thought, this woman is singing about something that is really important to her. I was only two or three when I heard it. I've never forgotten it.

PETER COOPER And that intensity is something that you've brought to your recordings. Is that important to you as a listener and as a singer?

LINDA RONSTADT Well I always say if music doesn't make you cry it's not doing its job. Should make you laugh or cry, but it's really important if it makes you cry. I think music should hit you like where you experience a feeling you never knew you had before. You know, you can hear a song and it can all of a sudden define an emotion for you that you didn't even know you were having until it digs it out of you.

PETER COOPER Country music is known for making folks cry. What were some of the early country records that were important to you?

LINDA RONSTADT Well Hank Williams was the first person I paid any attention to when I was about five I guess or six. Five. We used to drive down to Mexico on a regular basis when, before they put up that stupid wall. And we used to go down for lunch or dinner or visit friends or go on picnics. And there was a place called the Halfway Station on the way down from between Tucson and the Mexican border. It had really good food and they had a great jukebox. Half the jukebox was in Spanish and the other half was in English. And the English half had Hank Williams, all these Hank Williams records. So I'd save up my quarters and we'd go down there and I'd fill up the whole time we were eating with Hank Williams songs or Trio Calaveras on the other side.

PETER COOPER That's maybe not good for a five year old.

LINDA RONSTADT Well I had indulgent parents when it came to music. The thing that I noticed immediately was the similarity between the English music and the Mexican music in Spanish, was that it, they both were both music that came from an agrarian lifestyle. And I miss that element in country music, in modern country music. It's really detached from an agrarian lifestyle. It's sort of more attached to mall crawling. Suburban mall crawling. Going to get in my truck and go to the big box store. Pick up some microwave ovens and a couple of blenders.

PETER COOPER I'm not sure that Hank Williams ever went to the mall.

LINDA RONSTADT I don't think he did. And you know the Blue Sky Boys and Bill Monroe, people like that, they came out of real country existence. It was not an urban kind of music at all. And there was a such a definite difference. I grew up in the country myself. So I related to that.



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PETER COOPER Hank Williams' "Weary Blues" I'm told is a song that was important to you.

LINDA RONSTADT Yeah I don't know. There's something about his way of complaining that isn't exactly whining even though he kind of whines in his singing. But it really touched my heart the way he sang that. I think he wrote it too.

PETER COOPER That's something to be struck by that as a girl. You know this is serious adult music, and a lot of times these days we think that we have to almost patronize children with the music that we offered to them, and the films and TV shows and all that. But you were you were attuned to very adult music early on.

LINDA RONSTADT Well children have really strong intense passionate feelings. It might be passionate about the fact that they want a certain doll or they might miss their mother they might have been separated from their family or they might hate school or I don't know. I had very passionate feelings about school.

I used to. My sister had all these 45s of Hank Williams and Elvis Presley and The Everly Brothers. And I used to line, I would stack them up on the old record player that played forty fives with the big spindle in the middle. And I'd stack them up just in the order I'd want them. And I'd think about it all day when I was at school. When I got finished with school I was going to get to go home and listen to those records. And it got me through the day. I went to Catholic school, it was tough.

"Weary Blues From Waitin'" – Hank Williams (Greatest Hits / UMG)

PETER COOPER That was "Weary Blues From Waitin'" by Hank Williams, as chosen for your listening pleasure by the great Linda Ronstadt. Now let's get back to my conversation with Linda Ronstadt.

When did you decide that you were going to make a run for music as a living?

LINDA RONSTADT First grade. I couldn't do arithmetic and I just thought, "I'm going to be a singer. I don't have to do arithmetic." I didn't think I was going to be famous or a star or anything like that. I just thought I was going to sing and that I would somehow get paid for that and I could live, you know, decently.

PETER COOPER How'd that work out?

LINDA RONSTADT Well I did finally, I have finally learned how to do some simple arithmetic. I've made up my own way of counting on my fingers. But I can add a tip now without it coming out to be thousands of dollars.



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PETER COOPER Good.

LINDA RONSTADT And I got to do most of the music I wanted. I was lucky that way.

PETER COOPER You could count 3/4 time, 4/4 time, 6/8 time.

LINDA RONSTADT I could count backwards by seven.

PETER COOPER That's what you need. A lot of people consider you an innovator. Certainly everyone considers you a huge influence in country music. How did you view country versus rock and this whole California country rock thing that was happening as you were coming up and beginning to establish yourself as an important voice?

LINDA RONSTADT Well I really picked it on a song by song basis. You know there were. I had a rather eclectic musical background growing up in Tucson. We were at the border so there were all these crosscurrents of sound and music coming across the radio. We had big transmitters from XERF, Del Rio, Texas. Their transmitters were in Acuna Mexico so they could broadcast a real clear signal all the way to Canada.

And we heard country music, white gospel, black gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll. I heard everything on that station. And then we got the Louisiana Hayride also. And they must have had a strong enough signal somehow to get to Tucson. So the radio was a lot of it. But in my family also people sang both in Spanish and English. And my mother loved Gilbert and Sullivan. My older brother was a boy soprano, was a soloist in a boys choir that traveled all over the world. And I learned his songs.

So I. And the Hank Williams songs I learned from my sister. And I could play them on the guitar because they were three chords. So when I when I stopped being a member of the Stone Poneys band, I was mainly a harmony singer. I didn't have any material. I just. Those were the songs I knew so I just worked them up. It was kind of a random choice. I just thought they were good songs. And songs that I wanted to sing that expressed my own, what I was going through in my own life at the time.

And I like the idea of combining country songs with an R&B rhythm section. I made some clumsy attempts at doing that. But you know we were just experimenting in those days. There were other groups doing the same thing. Mostly I'd go to the record company they'd go, "Those country songs are too corny. You'll have to go to Bakersfield to do that." And I go, "No I think I'll just stay right here and do it. I know the players here."



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PETER COOPER Yeah. And you brought in some great players. I mean certainly the solo on "Blue Bayou" by Dan Dugmore is one of the classic steel guitar solos in popular music history.

LINDA RONSTADT Dan Dugmore.

PETER COOPER Yeah.

LINDA RONSTADT He's a really good player. He's a good regular guitar player too. I liked him. He was always called. We called him the secret weapon in our band.

PETER COOPER Emmylou Harris talks about you as a supportive force for her at a difficult time, after Gram Parsons' death and as she began embarking on a solo career. She says you came over at the house that she was staying in and that was also serving as a recording studio on Lania Lane. She said you hung a Dolly Parton album cover to sort of bless the proceedings as she began her first record. What do you remember of Emmylou in those days, and why did you, why were you supportive of her?

LINDA RONSTADT Well shortly after I met Emmy singing with Gram, I'd known Gram for a long time but I had only just met Emmy through Gram, Gram died. And it was just such a shock. It was so devastating for Emmy. And I said, "Well why don't you just come out and stay with me for a while?" I had to play the Troubadour or some other club I can't remember. And I said, "You can sing with me, we'll do some stuff together." So she came out, and she'd just written "Boulder to Birmingham." She played that for me. It still makes me cry to this day. There was so much pain in it. It was just anguish. And she dealt with it so gracefully. She carried her own burden. It was a heavy burden. To see somebody in that kind of hard grieving. It was hard to do.

But Emmy was such a good singer. I just loved her. I was hoping that we'd get to sing together sometime. You know just even if it was in the living room.

PETER COOPER She wrote that song, "Boulder to Birmingham" with Bill Danoff, who was an important part of the Washington D.C. music scene.

LINDA RONSTADT Oh yeah, Bill and Taffy.

PETER COOPER Yeah. And Washington isn't. It's thought of as a political town not a music town, but that was a town that was informative to you and to your music. There was a lot going on there.

LINDA RONSTADT Well it was an interesting place to play because there was a club there called the Cellar Door and the first two sets, we did three sets on the weekends. The first set would be sort of the embassy set, the second set would be sort of college



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kids, the third set would just be a bunch of rednecks. So you could play your music and see how it would play across those three cultures and get some good feedback. But also it was an interesting place for music to mix up because it's right there at the border of the South.

So there was a lot of a lot of country music mixed up with more sophisticated stuff coming out of pop music and jazz. And a very sophisticated urban environment as sort of as a petri dish to test and test things in to see how they grew. So the Cellar Door was an important club. I used to go there and play. Emmy and I'd hang out. She introduced me to John Starling from the Seldom Scene. And we used to go to their house and just stay up till four in the morning playing music.

Ricky Skaggs came. One time we got snowed in I had, Lowell George was with us. Ricky Skaggs was there. Paul Craft. We just, we didn't mind the snow a bit. We just played music until it melted enough that we could go home. But I was there for, I think I got the flu so I was there for at least, I think I was there for two weeks.

PETER COOPER I think. Well, I know I've heard some cassette tapes from those sessions and it just sounds joyful. And they weren't recording sessions. They were the. It was all just for the joy of music. It was just sitting around and playing.

LINDA RONSTADT It was so fun. Yeah it was just fun to sing. And there were different configurations like first Starling, and John Starling and Emmy were one configuration. Emmy and I were another one. Emmy and John and I were another one. Ricky Skaggs and I and Emmy were another one. You know we could just sing in all these different combinations. I learned a lot about bluegrass singing from Ricky Skaggs during that time.

PETER COOPER Ricky's an encyclopedia for sure. And he's an encyclopedia that can sing.

LINDA RONSTADT Yeah Ricky's amazing. I mean he's an anomaly. And John Starling is just the most beautiful acoustic guitar player. He has a great sense of the groove. You know, I always look for that in a musician if they carry a pocket that's distinctive like Ry Cooder or Jim Gordon, the drummer, or Jim Keltner. You know they have a pocket that is just innate in their playing. And you can hook onto that and just fly. And John had that great kind of great pocket in his acoustic guitar playing. And he was a really good singer.

PETER COOPER Yeah. An unusual singer in in bluegrass music in that it was a lower pitched voice, kind of a model for what Tony Rice came and did.

LINDA RONSTADT He's a baritone.



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PETER COOPER Yeah. And he became, he helped arrange some of your, the work that you did with Emmylou and Dolly Parton.

LINDA RONSTADT Well I wouldn't say that he arranged it so much as he played on it. That contributed to the arrangement. But he was like our sounding board for stuff. You know, he thought up great songs. Emmy thought up great songs too. I would always come in with something. But Emmy thought up most of the material. And we'd just kind of bounce it off John. Just kind of like a sensibility you know. Is this good or is this jive? kind of thing.

PETER COOPER He wasn't much for jive. It was this group that came to be known as The Trio. It was you and Emmylou and Dolly Parton. It was pretty remarkable on country music radio at the time to hear these sounds coming forth, to hear like a great acoustic bluegrass based sounds often. One song that you did was "High Sierra," written by the great Harley Allen, son of Red Allen who was a guy who spent a lot of time in the D.C. area as well. What is it that struck you about that song?

LINDA RONSTADT Oh my gosh! Just the loneliness and the yearning, sort of disappointment, trudging along in spite of everything kind of quality that it has to it. It has that kind of mountain sound I like a lot.

PETER COOPER Did you ever meet Harley Allen?

LINDA RONSTADT No I never did. I like, "I've been cussing, I've been scorned and I've been nothing these days." That's a great, great sentiment. You know humility and some sort of feeling of trudging on in spite of it all.

PETER COOPER Yes. His songwriting is reminiscent sometimes to me of the great Paul Craft. You of course...

LINDA RONSTADT Oh yeah. Paul. He wrote some good songs.

PETER COOPER He sure did.

LINDA RONSTADT He was there in that, when we were snowed in. That's where I learned "Keep Me From Blowing Away."

PETER COOPER Paul Craft, of one of the rare bluegrass-ers who was a Mensa member and he would tell you about it.

LINDA RONSTADT Right. I'm sure there are plenty more that could qualify.



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LINDA RONSTADT Songwriters are pretty smart.

PETER COOPER Oh yeah absolutely.

LINDA RONSTADT They're often readers.

PETER COOPER Yes.

LINDA RONSTADT You know I think you have to read to write. Literary fiction is a great way to have experiences of other people's lives and put yourself in a greater context socially. I think people, readers make better writers.

PETER COOPER During the Trio time were you were you comfortable shifting over into what amounted to the mainstream country world? Did you think, "Well it's just like putting on a different outfit?" Or did...

LINDA RONSTADT Well I don't think we did. We deliberately didn't consider whether things were going to be commercial when we recorded them. We just considered whether they were songs we loved and spoke for our hearts. And again Emmy would come in with this list of tunes that just would be killer, you know she's. She stays up later than I do and she hangs out later. So she'd get all the great new songs, and also old songs like Carter Family songs and stuff like that.

And we couldn't call it Bluegrass. We were thinking about calling it Pinkgrass. But really it was old timey music, Dolly said. She said, "Oh that's old timey music." And Emmy and I considered it parlor music, you know stuff that ladies would get together on an afternoon if they had time and genteelly drink cups of tea and play these songs with the mandolin and guitar, maybe a piano. And that's how we thought about it. We thought of it as a very feminine sort of skew to it.

But people that get together and they discuss their troubles and they support each other, they bear each other up. Because art is to help us identify our feelings and process our feelings. And that's what it should do for you. That's why people say "Well do you like a sad song or a happy song?" and they go, "I like a happy song." But after they sing a happy song you're just kind of happy, but after you sing a sad song you've worked through a process of grieving or being sad about something and you kind of transcended it and you feel happier. So sad songs usually make me happier. That's a roundabout way of saying that.

"High Sierra" – The Trio (Complete Trio Collection / Rhino)

"High Sierra," performed by the Trio of Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, and Emmylou Harris, and written by the remarkable Harley Allen. The great Tom T. Hall once told me



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that Harley Allen was the only person he thought might have stolen Tom T.'s muse. High praise. "High Sierra."

Linda, when we asked you what songs you'd like to feature here on "Voices in the Hall," you selected the Trio rather than any of your solo songs. Why's that?

Linda Ronstadt Well because it sounds. I don't authentically sing Country music. I'm not from a farm or a holler in Tennessee. So, but Dolly does. And Emmy can more than I can. So when I sing like that I can do it better with the Trio.

PETER COOPER Are you still able to enjoy listening to songs? There are some musicians who tell me well I don't I don't want to. You know, music is what I do professionally, it's not what I want to do on my own time. But do you sit and listen?

LINDA RONSTADT I always listen to music. I love opera on YouTube. I'm a big fan of YouTube. I mean I'm a audiophile that now listens to music on my cell phone. It's just disgusting how low we've slunk. But I'm an opera fan, so on YouTube you can get people from the turn of the 20th century all the way up to the present day. You can compare sopranos singing an aria from some opera that I can hear Rosa Ponselle sing it, I can hear Maria Callas sing, and I can hear Anna Netrebko sing it. So you can see how it's changed and it's really amazing. It's like a little historical tour through opera.

PETER COOPER There are people who would find it strange that you can love Maria Callas and father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe and Merle Haggard.

LINDA RONSTADT Well they're all singing their truth you know. And truth resonates. They just plant their feet and tell the truth. That's what Maria Callas did with opera, that's what Merle Haggard did with his stuff. It's all the same.

PETER COOPER Are you aware of your influence on modern country music singers and the preponderance of singers who cite you as a model?

LINDA RONSTADT Well. Not particularly, but people say it and sometimes I think. I think somebody shouldn't try to copy me, they should copy the people I was trying to copy. Because everybody copies. You know you copy, you think you're going to copy it and comes out sounding like you instead of the person you thought you were trying to copy. But I always say get a Bonnie Raitt record.

PETER COOPER Those are some good records Bonnie Raitt made.

LINDA RONSTADT Bonnie, Oh my God. She's an amazing singer.



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PETER COOPER There are so many people in Nashville who are associated with you and you. We talked about Dan Dugmore earlier. Obviously J.D. Souther is around here and still making great records.

LINDA RONSTADT He's still making great. The last record he made was so good. I just, it was one of my favorite records of all time that he made. And he's still writing at the top of his talent. He's a good songwriter.

PETER COOPER So when are you going to move here?

LINDA RONSTADT You have something called the Vaseline Sky that I thought would be oppressive, the lowering sky. I like it here in San Francisco. We've got great weather. I can get to the opera. It's good. Nashville's nice. You get good quality of life I think for not as much money as here, although I understand it's getting expensive. And you have better food than we have in San Francisco. Food's gotten bad in San Francisco.

PETER COOPER We have good food and far less earthquakes. Last time I lived in San Francisco was the World Series earthquake.

LINDA RONSTADT But you have tornados and ice storms every year. We don't have an earthquake every year. We only have bad ones every 50 years or so. Ice storms, ice storms and tornadoes I wouldn't want to deal with.

PETER COOPER I can understand. I can understand that. Yeah. They're not a lot of fun for sure, but you can kind of know when they're coming.

LINDA RONSTADT Right.

PETER COOPER Obviously this documentary that's been made about you and your life and your career. Are you comfortable with people looking at this life and career and kind of assessing it?

LINDA RONSTADT No it's very uncomfortable, but there's not much I can do about it. I reconciled myself to the fact that there was a paper and print version of me walking around from the '70s that didn't have anything to do with me. Now it's morphed into life on the Internet. Anything you ever did in your life is on YouTube and you don't even remember you did it. So I resolved at some point to not look at stuff like that because it was, it was disturbing. But you know we have no control over how the media decides to represent us. I just don't have any control over it.

PETER COOPER I'm told you've been listening to a band called I'm With Her recently which is...



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LINDA RONSTADT Yeah I like them.

PETER COOPER ...reminiscent in some ways of the Trio.

LINDA RONSTADT Well it's real virtuoso singing, harmony singing. And good playing too, those girls are really good. I also like this little band called First Aid Kit. Oh man. I mean to show how far flung country music has, it went, got out of the, got off the farm and went off all the way to Sweden. These two Swedish sisters Clara and Johanna have a band called First Aid Kit. And they wrote a song called "Emmylou."

They had heard Gram Par- Emmy's record with Gram Parsons and they really loved it. It really had a big influence on them. And they made this record. They sing in English. It's about singing with somebody you're in love with, singing partners you know. And they say, the chorus is "I'll be your Emmylou and I'll be your June if you be my Gram and my Johnny too." And it's got its pedal steel guitar and a really good use of it. The best use I've heard in pop music for a long time. And they just totally love that music. So just you know it moves to far distant shores and plants a seed there. This was a good result of it.

"Emmylou" – First Aid Kit (The Lion's Roar / Wichita Recordings)

PETER COOPER That was "Emmylou," by First Aid Kit, a pair of sisters from Sweden who obviously have been impacted by Country Music Hall of Fame member Emmylou Harris, who's a great friend of Linda Ronstadt, our guest today. And that song was suggested by our guest on Voices in the Hall, Linda Ronstadt.

Are you happy with how things went? Did you ever zig when you meant to zag as you look back on things in your career?

LINDA RONSTADT Did I ever zig when I meant to zag?

PETER COOPER Yes.

LINDA RONSTADT Well there are a lot of times that that happened. I mean there are things I regret. I'm sorry I didn't start singing Mexican music earlier. I tried, but the record company didn't want me to. But I wish I had started actively trying to get myself up to professional speed with it because it's. When I sang Mexican music it was just with my family, it wasn't to a professional level. And it took me some woodshedding to get up to speed. And I don't know. Placido Domingo asked me to make a record one time, and I didn't think I could fit it into the schedule.

PETER COOPER You turned down Placido Domingo?



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LINDA RONSTADT Well we talked about it, but he wanted to do Mexican music and I wasn't sure I liked that operatic approach to it. But he's a wonderful singer. You know I didn't know if I could reconcile my style to that. I love him singing opera. He's such a great singer. God he's amazing. He's so musical. He can conduct too.

PETER COOPER Well I turned him down six times myself. So I understand.

LINDA RONSTADT I should've just cast the dice stylistically because he's such a great singer. He could rely on his instincts to pull it out of the hole.

PETER COOPER Well Linda, you're a pretty good singer too if people like you know pitch and melody and emotion and things like that. And I'm so glad that you spent time with me today. Thank you so much.

LINDA RONSTADT Well you're welcome.

PETER COOPER It's great to talk to you.

LINDA RONSTADT Thank you so much. Nice to meet you. Bye!

PETER COOPER What a great pleasure to spend time with Kennedy Center honoree Linda Ronstadt, a resonant and beguiling force in American music.

Learn more about Linda Ronstadt at our website, VoicesInTheHall.org. And use the handle @VoicesInTheHall to find us and to follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Voices in the Hall is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in collaboration with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio.

This show was recorded in the Museum's Audio Lair by the Museum's Audio Czar Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper. Thanks for listening. We invite you to visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.

That's a wrap for Season 2 right?